

Walk It Off

By Charles Stuart Platkin
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After decades of being told that "exercise" requires a serious commitment of time and sweat (and sometimes aches, pains, and tears), I know it may be hard to believe that something as simple as going for a walk could improve your health and help you lose weight.

In fact, I must admit, I never thought much of walking. I mean, it was always a necessary means to an end if I had to get from Point A to Point B, but as a form of exercise, it seemed a bit weak.



But research shows that walking works. A study published in the American Journal of Public Health found that people who live in the suburbs -- and therefore drive everywhere -- weigh six pounds more than urbanites in dense cities who are able to walk more. In fact, Manhattan, the heart of New York City, has one of the lowest obesity rates in the country, and many experts attribute this to the fact that so many of its residents walk regularly.

Walking also allows you to accomplish other tasks at the same time, such as picking up your cleaning, shopping, or stopping for a quart of low-fat milk. "Walking is a flexible and available exercise that's easy to incorporate into your everyday life. Other benefits include preferentially losing more fat and hanging onto more muscle," says Ross E. Andersen, Ph.D., professor of geriatric medicine at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

Walking Works

Additionally, walking helps you become more mindful of what you're eating so you can manage your weight better. "When you consciously increase your physical activity, you become more aware of your surroundings, and you're less likely to grab that candy bar at the checkout counter," says Andersen. And, he goes on to explain, walking also seems to be the "gateway" to more vigorous exercise, which leads to even greater overall results. "Self-confidence increases after you start a walking program, and as your self-confidence increases, you start including more fitness in your life."

And, get this -- you only burn about 20 percent more calories when you run a mile than you do when you walk a mile. So walking means less sweat and less muscle stress with about the same calorie expenditure. Not bad, right?

In fact, recent studies have highlighted the many benefits of going out for a stroll. Walking has fewer risks of injury than fast-paced jogging; walkers get a better overall workout than most runners; and age does not serve as an impediment -- both young and old can participate and reap the rewards. A moderately paced walk burns almost 5 calories per minute, and while that may not seem like much, it adds up.

In a key study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, Andersen showed that a program of diet plus lifestyle activity (e.g., simple walking) can be a suitable alternative and offer health benefits similar to diet plus vigorous activity for overweight individuals.

You might want to consider another study from the University of Pittsburgh, which found that easy physical activity burns calories and encourages weight loss just as effectively as high-intensity activity. "It appears that intensity of the activity is not the main factor impacting long-term weight loss or weight control," says John M. Jakicic, Ph.D., professor at the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh and co-author of the study. But in order to lose weight, "you need to walk an additional 250 to 300 minutes per week, over a period of four to five days," cautions Jakicic.

Not convinced yet? There was also a Duke University study which showed that you can walk for 30 minutes a day, not diet, and maintain weight loss. And according to the National Weight Control Registry, which keeps an ongoing record of individuals who have managed to maintain weight loss for five years or more, a staggering 77 percent of successful losers use walking as their primary means of physical activity.

Be Creative

Malls, parks, paths, trails and even your neighborhood sidewalks are perfect sites for a 10-minute, 15-minute, or even a 30-minute walk. On rainy or cold days, malls can be converted into indoor tracks. The level flooring (fewer injuries) and air conditioning are excellent motivators.

Make it Scenic

If walking around the mall isn't your thing, try locating walking tours around your city. Sightseeing is very distracting, and before you know it, you'll have walked a few miles while discovering more about your neighborhood or even a new neighborhood.

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Research shows that the more scenic your walks are, the more you'll want to take them. Some parks offer trails specifically designed for hikers. Grass and dirt paths are flat and reduce shock and stress on your feet. If you want a little extra challenge, find paths with hills, take a few breaks, and walk for an hour instead of just 30 minutes.

Make it Social

Various communities sponsor walking clubs; take advantage of those resources and join. Walking in a group will increase your motivation and will help you challenge yourself by keeping up with the others.

Make it Practical

A common complaint is being too busy to exercise. So fit in your walking with things you need to do anyway. The dog has to get out, so why not take him for a walk? The kids need to go to school -- why not walk them to the bus stop? If it's too far to walk all the way to the store or wherever you need to go, drive or take the bus halfway and walk the remaining distance.

Walking Shoes

But before you go outside and start counting your steps, keep in mind that you need to have the proper shoes. Podiatrists suggest getting cross trainers, or specific walking or running shoes. And stay away from those "designer" shoes that are all looks but no support.

Your Environment Counts

It's important to understand your environmental constraints and barriers. The biggest barriers or excuses for not walking, according to a study in the Journal of the American College of Sports Medicine, are the lack of walking trails or sidewalks, not seeing other people exercising, unattended dogs, and heavy traffic. "Learn how to work around these obstacles by setting goals and researching your area," says Ross C. Brownson, Ph.D., professor of epidemiology at St. Louis University School of Public Health in Missouri and a co-author of the study. Find suitable walking and hiking trails in your area, come up with a schedule, and figure out what you're going to do on a regular basis. Also, keep in mind that you don't have to do the same thing every day. You can go for a walk around the neighborhood one day and on the other days simply go window-shopping at a mall.

Ask yourself the following questions about where you live:

- * Does your neighborhood have public or private recreation facilities (such as parks with walking or hiking trails)? Are they in good condition? Can you see yourself using them? To locate hiking and/or biking trails in your area, check out www.trailink.com.
- * Does your local public school have any facilities you can use (like a track)?
- * Does your neighborhood shopping mall have walking programs available?
- * Do concerns about safety at the public recreation facilities in your community influence your using them? Do you have safety concerns about walking in your neighborhood? Plan ahead and think about how you can overcome these barriers.

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